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ABSTRACT

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Running head: STUDENT NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND TEACHERS

ED 447 526

Student Nonverbal Communication and its Influence on Teachers and Teaching: A Review of Literature

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Abstract

This review of literature examines student nonverbal communication and its influence on teachers and their teaching. The review is divided into five sections. The first section explains why we consider this topic to be important, especially for new teachers and their professional development. The second section explains our focus, which is student nonverbal communication. The third and fourth sections examine the research literature from the education and communication disciplines. The fifth and final section, examines implications for the classroom and provides teachers with suggestions for how they might use this information.

Student Nonverbal Communication

and its Influence on Teachers and Teaching: A Review of Literature

For several years now we have worked with public school teachers who are pursuing their graduate degrees, and with graduate teaching assistants who teach multiple sections of a basic course. Consistently we hear anecdotal evidence where instructors who teach the same course year after year, or who teach multiple sections of the same course, walk away from their classes having had entirely different classroom experiences. Many of these instructors have a difficult and frustrating time articulating why their classroom experiences remain so divergent. They question themselves and their self-efficacy as they attempt to find plausible explanations for such inconsistencies. Since many of these instructors teach the *same* course content in the *same* classroom during the *same* school term, the only variable that appears to change is the student.

Although we would like to think that we're immune from our students' behavior, we're not (Brophy & Good, 1974). Students react to our teaching in a variety of ways. Some remain active and interactive. They laugh at our jokes and even seem to enjoy them. Some remain passive and apathetic. They remain too cool to care and laugh at us rather than our jokes. Still others remain entirely lost. They would laugh at our jokes if they understood them.

The focus of this paper is on students and how they have been shown to influence teachers and their teaching. Specifically, this paper will examine student nonverbal behaviors and how these behaviors influence how we perceive and ultimately teach students. This paper is divided into five sections. The first section explains why we consider this paper to be important, especially for new teachers and their professional development. The second section explains our focus,

which is student nonverbal communication. The third and fourth sections examine the research literature from the education and communication disciplines. The fifth and final section, examines implications for the classroom and provides teachers with suggestions for how they might use this information.

Students Influence Teachers?

Yes! Many teachers leave their education programs or their in-service teacher training workshops getting only half of the story. We learn how our behavior influences students and their learning. Much of the education and communication research examines teaching and learning as a linear, one-directional relationship. Research studies often ignore the transactional and relational aspects of how students and their behaviors influence teachers and their teaching. In fact, Brophy and Good (1974) suggest that teachers' actions toward students are actually reactions to students' behavior.

Another reason for focusing on students is because of what we know about teacher expectations and how these expectations influence our teaching. Since the publication of *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), there has been much interest and attention paid to the effects of teachers' expectations of students on the achievement of those students. Rosenthal & Jacobson reported on a study where elementary school teachers' expectations about some of their students were manipulated in a way that was intended to be beneficial to those students. In this study, teachers were led to believe that some of their students were "late bloomers" and that they would achieve at an accelerated pace sometime soon after the beginning of the school term. Actually, the students who had been labeled "late bloomers" were randomly selected

from the class and were considered average to below average in terms of their intelligence.

The results from this study revealed the power of teacher expectations on student achievement. The late blooming students improved their IQ scores dramatically compared to the other students in the class. This study suggests that teachers form expectations for their students and communicate in a manner that remains consistent with those expectations.

But how are expectations formed? What role do students' communication behaviors play in how we perceive and teach them? For years, classic studies in social psychology informed us of the role stereotyping played in how we perceive others and the problems associated with this perception process. A more recent study, however, suggests that teachers' perceptions and expectations for students are based not only on group stereotypes, but also on student achievement, performance, and level of motivation (Madon, Jussim, Keiper, Eccles, Smith, & Palumbo, 1998). Another classroom study found that teacher behavior is influenced more by immediate student behavior (including student communication) than by other student characteristics such as sex and age (Natriello & Dornbusch, 1983). Both of these studies suggest that individual student behavior may play a more influential role in the formation of teacher expectations than group membership or individual characteristics.

Yet another reason for examining the influence of student communication on teachers and teaching is because teachers use student communication as information to monitor and evaluate their own teaching effectiveness. Gage and Berliner (1992) mentioned that teachers, like dancers, actors, and musicians, assess their performance by "reading" their audience. Clark and Peterson (1986)

found that during instruction the greatest proportion of a teacher's thoughts deal with how well instruction is being received by students.

Why Only Nonverbal Communication?

Although students communicate using both verbal and nonverbal messages, this paper focuses only on nonverbal messages. Researchers define nonverbal communication as the process of stimulating meaning in the minds of others through nonverbal messages, or messages that are non-linguistic or non-language based (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). Students convey a variety of nonverbal messages in the classroom. Some students sit upright in their chairs with a slight forward body lean. They maintain direct eye contact with their instructor while simultaneously nodding their heads and uttering vocal assurances. These nonverbal messages have been shown to stimulate, in our minds, meanings of attentiveness and responsiveness. These students are a pleasure to teach. Some students, however, sit in a slouching position with their heads bobbing back and forth, eyes closed, and snoring. These students are less than a pleasure to teach. Their nonverbal messages scream boredom, lack of interest, and apathy to name just a few.

One of the reasons why we have focused this paper on student nonverbal messages is because they remain, for the most part, unintentional and uncontrollable. Much of our nonverbal expression remains outside of our conscious awareness. Because of this, people have a tendency to trust the nonverbal message as the "real" message, especially when verbal and nonverbal messages remain incongruent. Many times we ask students if they understand a particular concept. In order not to appear ignorant in front of their peers and/or the teacher, they respond with a "yes." However because of the delay in their

response (nonverbal) and their "yes" (verbal) was conveyed in a tentative manner, an observant teacher usually interprets this discrepant message accurately using the nonverbal dimension rather than the verbal dimension of the message. In short, nonverbal messages are considered more trustworthy and authentic than verbal messages.

Another reason why nonverbal messages remain important to our communication is because they convey our emotions. Some research suggests that up to 90% of the emotional meaning in our messages is conveyed through nonverbal behaviors (Mehrabian & Ferris, 1967). Facial and vocalic cues such as eyebrows, wrinkles, and vocal inflections have been shown to stimulate the bulk of these emotional meanings in others.

To summarize, students' classroom behaviors influence the expectations we have for them and nonverbal messages have a tendency to remain more trustworthy and stimulate more of the emotional meaning in messages than verbal messages. Now, we will shift our focus to the research literature in the education and communication disciplines that examines more closely student nonverbal behavior and its influence on teachers and teaching.

Review of Education Literature

The education research literature examines on how we use specific student nonverbal behaviors to form impressions of students. The literature also suggests that we use student nonverbal messages to evaluate our teaching effectiveness and satisfaction. According to Brophy and Good (1974), student behavior ultimately conditions teacher behavior.

Teacher Impressions of Students

Brooks and Woolfolk (1987) reviewed three nonverbal cues that have been shown to influence teachers including proxemics or students' use of space, student attentiveness behaviors, and chronemics, or students' use of time.

Proxemics. Research indicates that proximity, or where a student sits on the first day of class (assuming student choice) affects teacher perceptions of students. Students who decide to sit closer to their teacher are perceived to be more attentive, likable, initiating, and responsive than students who decide to sit farther away. Teachers perceive students who sit closer to them as being willing to participate and those who sit farther away as avoiding classroom participation. According to Brooks and Woolfolk (1987),

> [i]f one of the first impressions is that the student is reluctant to participate, then the teacher's reaction could be either inviting or defensive. In either case, the impression affects the teacher's response, and this response in turn affects the student's impression of the teacher. (p. 55)

Attentiveness. Teachers perceive a student's upright posture, forward body lean, eye contact, head nodding, and smiling as attentiveness behaviors. These behaviors are positively related to teachers' evaluations of students' competence, learning, teachability, and attitude. As student nonverbal attentiveness behaviors increase, so do teachers' perceptions of their students' competence and teachability. The reverse relationship also occurs. As students' nonverbal attentiveness decreases, so do teachers' perceptions of their students' competence, teachability, and attitudes.

Brophy and Evertson (1981) reported that teachers do not favor students who avoid eye contact. These students are perceived as being unhappy,

inattentive, and/or uncooperative. In a similar attentiveness study examining children and adult behavior, Cantor and Gelfand (1974) found that adults attended more to responsive children (students who looked, smiled, and reacted enthusiastically to the adult) and gave them more help than unresponsive children. The adults also rated the children as more attractive, likable, and competent when they behaved responsively than when they were unresponsive. Cantor and Gelfand concluded that influence is bi-directional in adult-child interactions and suggests that awkward children can be trained to elicit positive reactions from adults.

Chronemics. In terms of students' use of time, research indicates that the timing of a student's interruption and the rate at which a student responds to a teacher's request impacts teacher impressions. Students who make requests at inappropriate or difficult times for the teacher are perceived negatively. Merritt and Humphrey (1979) suggest that some students are able to break classroom norms and successfully interrupt their teachers. These students get their teacher's attention by nonverbally approaching him/her and standing quietly. This allows the teacher to break away from his/her engagement with other students when the time is appropriate. Students who were successful interrupters also avoided interrupting a teacher when the classroom was noisy or when the teacher was already overextended in terms of student engagement. Similarly, teachers appear to perceive students who respond quickly to their requests more positively than students who require more time.

These nonverbal cues and the meanings they stimulate in our minds ultimately influence reciprocal behavior that is directed back to the student.

> If a student is seen as uncooperative (as a result of his/her nonverbal behavior), teachers may interpret common behaviors such as asking for a second explanation, forgetting homework, or losing materials as hostile acts intended to cause disruption. Teachers making such interpretations may respond with criticism and punishment. (Brooks & Woolfolk, 1987, p. 56)

When this happens students react to teacher frustration and respond with their own, causing a downward spiral of mutual frustration. It is also important to remember that the opposite type of spiraling can occur with students who remain nonverbally attentive in the classroom. For example, students who remain nonverbally attentive are perceived by their teachers as competent and as possessing positive attitudes. Students react to these teacher perceptions in a positive manner causing an upward spiral of mutual satisfaction.

Teaching Effectiveness and Satisfaction

The education research suggests that student nonverbal behaviors influence how we assess our teaching effectiveness and satisfaction. Overall, teachers who remain interactive and student-centered have been shown to invest the greatest portion of their thought, while teaching, to evaluating how well their instruction is received by students. While conveying their content and interacting with students, they simultaneously assess their teaching effectiveness.

Jecker, Maccoby, Breitrose and Rose (1964) examined how well teachers assess students' understanding of their content based on students' visual feedback cues, such as head nods and facial expressions. This research team predicted that when teacher judgments of student comprehension were based

on visual nonverbal cues, misperceptions of students' comprehension would be more likely to occur than judgments based on verbal cues.

Their findings supported their prediction, and audio seemed to be the important variable. When audio was absent, teachers were significantly less able to accurately assess cognitive understanding. When audio was present, regardless of video, teachers were significantly more able to accurately assess student comprehension. Important to this study was the fact that the experience level of the teacher did not increase accuracy in perceiving student visual feedback from students.

This research suggests that since increased *verbal* feedback remains less likely to occur as classroom size continues to increase, teachers would benefit from learning more about students' *nonverbal* behaviors and how to accurately interpret such behaviors. Understanding how we decode nonverbal messages and ways to enhance the decoding process will be discussed in the final section of this paper.

Another study by Jenkins and Deno (1969) examined whether or not students' nonverbal feedback behavior had any influence on teachers' evaluations of their performance in terms of effectiveness and satisfaction. They predicted that teachers may rely heavily on student behavior such as smiling, hand-raising, sitting straight, and behaving excitedly as ways to judge their own effectiveness. Their prediction was supported. Teachers who received positive nonverbal feedback from their students considered teaching to be more enjoyable, predicted that they would be more effective teachers, and thought that their students learned more than teachers receiving negative nonverbal feedback from students.

Review of Communication Literature

Instructional communication researchers have recently started examining student nonverbal communication and its influence on teachers and teaching. Like the education literature, communication research focuses on the role of nonverbal behavior in the perception process. The communication literature also examines nonverbal communication as a transactional process whereby students and teachers mutually and simultaneously influence each other's reciprocal behaviors.

Teacher Perceptions

Over the past two decades, much has been written on teacher nonverbal immediacy and its effects on students' perceptions of teachers and learning outcomes. Immediacy, for those who are unfamiliar with the concept, is defined as physical or psychological closeness (Mehrabian, 1971) and is created primarily through expressive nonverbal behaviors such as forward body leans, purposeful gestures, and direct eye contact. In the classroom, students perceive immediate teachers as approachable and likeable. Conversely, students avoid non-immediate teachers and find them less likeable.

But does student nonverbal immediacy influence teachers and their perceptions of students in similar ways? Baringer and McCroskey (2000) examined this question. They predicted that student nonverbal immediacy would be positively correlated with how teachers perceive student credibility and interpersonal attraction. In other words as teachers perceive more student nonverbal immediacy, they will also perceive their students as being more credible and more interpersonally attractive. Credibility is a perception of believability and is based on how competent and trustworthy we perceive others

to be. In the classroom context, there are two forms of interpersonal attraction including task and social. We perceive others to be task attractive if they can help us meet our work objectives. When we perceive others to be outgoing, personable, and warm, we consider them to be socially attractive. Both credibility and interpersonal attraction have been shown to be important perception variables that influence teacher and student relationships.

Baringer and McCroskey (2000) also predicted that student immediacy would increase teachers' liking for students, teachers' motivation to teach, and teachers' projections of how well students will do in their courses. Their predictions were supported. Students who were immediate (compared to those who were less immediate) were perceived more positively by their teachers. They were considered more believable, task and socially attractive, and likeable. Teachers were more motivated to teach the immediate students and teachers projected that immediate students would do better in the course than less immediate students.

In a study examining student nonverbal responsiveness, which is similar to immediacy, the first author of this paper found that instructors who perceived fewer student nonverbal responsive cues, especially audible nonverbal cues, evaluated more negatively both their students and the quality of the teacher-student relationship. He also found that instructors considered themselves to be less effective in the classroom and were less satisfied teaching as perceptions of student nonverbal responsiveness decreased (Mottet, 2000).

These two studies confirm for students that which previous research has learned about teachers. Not only does a teacher's nonverbal expressiveness influence positive outcomes in students, but students' nonverbal immediacy and

responsiveness yield positive outcomes in teachers. The rule of reciprocity may account for much of the immediacy and responsiveness that occurs in the classroom. When teachers exhibit nonverbal immediacy, students may also become more nonverbally responsive reinforcing teacher immediacy. Similarly, when students remain nonverbally immediate with teachers, teachers may become more responsive reinforcing students' immediacy. The reciprocity effect will be discussed in the next section.

Teachers' Reciprocal Behavior

Comstock (1999) explored the reciprocal nature of human communication in the classroom context. She tested the theory of interaction adaptation (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995). This theory suggests that communication between people remains transactional. Unlike linear conceptualizations of communication where teacher messages affect student messages, communication as transaction is where both teacher and students' communicative behavior simultaneously affects the other's. The theory of interaction adaptation suggests that both parties adapt to the other's behavior and both are responsible for relational outcomes.

Specifically, interaction adaptation theory stipulates that when people enter communication transactions with others, they have certain *requirements*, *expectations*, and *desires*. In the classroom, many teachers have *required* safety and comfort needs that influence their communication with students. Some teachers remain more structured than others and have a difficult time deviating from a lesson plan, even when a teachable moment exists. Structure provides them with the security they require in front of their students. Experimenting

with a new idea or teaching technique, in an extemporaneous manner, remains uncomfortable for them. Other teachers do not have these same security needs.

Teachers *expect* students to remain responsive to their instruction. They expect to see students paying attention and responding accordingly. They expect their students to remain on task. They expect their students to ask questions when confused. Finally, when teachers interact with students in the classroom, they hope to achieve a *desired* level of behavior. Teachers have instructional goals. They have a desire to remain on schedule and to accomplish their lesson plans. They have a desire to remain effective.

The theory suggests that future communicative behavior is determined by what is needed (required), anticipated (expected), and preferred (desired) in any given interaction. If teacher-student classroom interactions provide each other with what is needed, anticipated, and preferred, then interaction patterns are reciprocated back and forth from teacher to students to teacher. However, if the behaviors that teachers require, expect, and desire from students do not match actual student behaviors, then teachers adapt their communication to bring about their communication goals.

To illustrate this theory, we would like to walk you through three different classroom scenarios. For each of the scenarios, assume you have a *required* need for control, an *expectation* that your students will remain on task and complete their lesson, and a *desire* to establish a cooperative and democratic classroom environment. Pay attention to how you automatically adapt your communication behavior by *reciprocating*, *diverging*, or *converging* to bring about your interaction needs.

In the first classroom, students interact in such a way that allows you to maintain control. They remain on task and finish the lesson. You are able to establish and maintain a democratic classroom environment. Their behavior meets your required, expected, and desired needs. In this classroom, you adapt your behavior by *reciprocating* their on-task and cooperative communication behaviors. This is good!

In the second classroom, students interact in such a way where you sense a lack of control. They're not on task and will not complete the lesson. Their behavior does not meet your interaction needs. Rather than reciprocating their behavior, you adapt your behavior in a *divergent* manner. You become authoritative. You become directive. You make the decisions and call the shots. In short, you interact with them in a firm manner to bring them in line with your interaction needs. This is not good!

In the third and final classroom, students remain on task, cooperative, and ahead of schedule. Their behavior not only meets your interaction needs, but exceeds them. In this classroom, you adapt your communication behavior by *converging*. In short, you increase your level of interaction with your students. You increase your level of encouragement. You reinforce their democratic decision-making. You provide them with maximum freedom. This is very good!

Comstock (1999) tested the theory of interaction adaptation theory in the classroom. Based on teachers' preferences for nonverbally responsive students, she predicted that when students increase their level of nonverbal involvement in the classroom, teachers would reciprocate by increasing their own involvement. Conversely, she predicted that when students decrease and maintain a lower level of nonverbal involvement in the classroom, teachers

would adapt their communication accordingly to bring about their expectations for student nonverbal responsiveness.

She found that even during a single, ten minute class presentation to a group of students, teachers' role performance were, in part, directed by their students. "Taken together with previous research on the effects of teacher involvement behaviors on student motivation and learning, results suggest that teacher-student interaction is transactional and that teacher-student relationships involve mutual influence, with each partner partially responsible for the other's role performance and important relational outcomes" (Comstock, 1999, p. 22).

Conclusions from the Research Literature

Before discussing classroom implications and providing teachers with a few suggestions that may assist them in the classroom, we would like to summarize briefly some of the conclusions yielded from the research literature. These conclusions will be stated as knowledge claims or as statements reminding us of what we have learned from the education and communication research literature.

1. Teachers' pre-existing expectations for students influence how they teach students.
2. Teachers' attitudes and expectations for students are based partially on how students behave in the classroom, in addition to student attributes such as sex, race, or social economic status.
3. Teachers perceive student nonverbal behaviors and these perceptions influence their attitudes and expectations for students.
4. Students who sit closer to their teachers and engage in attentiveness behaviors are perceived more positively than students who sit farther

away and students who fail to make eye contact, nod their heads, and sit upright with forward body leans.

5. Students who interrupt teachers and respond to their questions in an appropriate and timely manner are perceived more positively than students who fail to notice appropriate times for interruptions and who require additional time to respond to questions.
6. Students who remain nonverbally immediate/responsive in the classroom are liked more, considered more teachable, competent, and trustworthy, and considered more interpersonally attractive by their teachers.
7. Teachers' initial attitudes and expectations for students influence how they perceive students' nonverbal behaviors. Two students may convey the same nonverbal message, but because of the teacher's existing attitude or expectation, he/she perceives one student's nonverbal message in a positive manner and the other's in a negative manner.
8. Teachers and students mutually influence each other's classroom interaction behaviors. Teachers who perceive students negatively, treat them less positively. Students react to these less-than-positive communication behaviors by reciprocating similar behaviors, which in turn reinforce the teacher's original attitudes and expectations for students.
9. Teachers remain more motivated to work with nonverbally immediate/responsive students, consider their teacher-student

relationships to be of higher quality, and project that these students will not only do better in their courses, but in life in general.

10. Teachers who perceive more of their students' nonverbal responsive and attentive behaviors consider themselves to be more effective as teachers and more satisfied in their teaching profession.

Now, What Are We To Do With This Information?

As a way to conclude this paper on student nonverbal communication and its influence on teachers and teaching, we would like to discuss some classroom implications and offer a few suggestions that may help new teachers use the information presented in the paper. Most of the suggestions that follow focus on teacher awareness. Becoming aware of how we form expectations, reciprocate nonverbal behavior, and interpret nonverbal behavior can improve our teaching (Brophy & Good, 1974).

Forming expectations based on nonverbal behavior. Teachers must guard against the natural tendency to form an expectation for a student using limited amounts of information. It is easy to take short cuts and to prematurely form expectations, especially as classes continue to increase in size and classroom responsibilities continue to expand. We must also guard against our natural tendency to rely too heavily on nonverbal messages. What happens when students cannot regulate or control their nonverbal behavior? In some classes, students are required to sit in assigned seats. Other times, students arrive late to class for reasons beyond their control and cannot obtain a front and center seat to present a positive impression.

Some students may not be as attentive as they would like to be because of distractions caused by less concerned students whose misbehaviors go

undetected by the teacher. And what happens when teachers cannot easily detect student nonverbal responsive behaviors such as in the large lecture hall or when they teach in distance education programs where their instruction is delivered via interactive television or computer? Teachers cannot assume in these non-traditional classrooms that students are less competent or teachable.

In these situations, we have a couple of suggestions for teachers. First, we encourage teachers to check their perceptions with students. Second, we encourage teachers to gather information from multiple sources and channels before solidifying expectations. To check perceptions, we suggest that teachers describe (rather than evaluate) with the student what they see him/her doing. Then teachers need to ask for clarification to insure that the perception is accurate. Assume you have a student who appears uninterested in your class. Rather than assuming disinterest in your class, we encourage you to describe what it is you see with the student. Then ask for clarification and be prepared for their reactions. They may not be interested in your content. Or they may be interested, but distracted. If the student lacks interest, then adapt your content accordingly by making it relevant to his/her life. If the student is interested, but distracted, then the perception checking process may allow you to eliminate the distraction for the student.

The second suggestion is for teachers to increase the number of communication channels they use before solidifying perceptions of students. Give students additional options for communicating with you and their classmates. Many quiet students are also nonverbally unexpressive and don't feel comfortable talking in class. Electronic mail and bulletin boards (or list serves) complement classroom interaction nicely. These instructional media give

teachers additional channels from which to receive and evaluate student communication.

Reciprocating nonverbal behavior. We must also guard against the natural tendency to reciprocate nonverbal behavior. This may partially explain why some teachers have been known to walk into a classroom energized and optimistic about the day's lesson, but once confronted with lethargic and apathetic students leave the classroom feeling drained and defeated. Other teachers approach the same classroom, but leave feeling more energized and successful as a teacher. In the first situation, it appears that the teacher may have been more susceptible to student nonverbal behavior and ultimately adapted to or reciprocated similar lethargic and apathetic communicative behavior. In the second situation, it appears that the teacher was not only aware of the undesirable student behavior, but adapted his/her behavior accordingly in order to stimulate appropriate student communicative behavior that was conducive to learning.

New teachers may be more susceptible to reciprocating students' nonverbal communication than more experienced teachers. We believe that novice teachers focus more on student nonverbal behavior as a way to confirm themselves rather than to determine student comprehension of course content. As a result of their need for self-validation as a new teacher, they remain susceptible to their students' nonverbal behavior. We suspect that experienced and effective teachers focus on student nonverbal behavior not for reasons of self-validation, but as a way to adapt their instructional communication to insure that they are meeting students' learning needs, expectations, and desires. These professionals may be more aware of how student behavior affects teaching

behavior and have in some ways inoculated themselves against student behavior.

Suspecting that new teachers may be more vulnerable to their students' nonverbal behavior because of their need for immediate feedback, we encourage new teachers to periodically assess their teaching effectiveness by asking students for formative feedback. Unlike summative feedback assessments, where student feedback data are collected at the end of the term when it is too late for teachers to adapt their teaching to accommodate students, formative feedback assessments are collected periodically throughout the semester. This way new teachers can assess immediately how they are doing and make necessary adjustments to their teaching if necessary. Collecting student feedback data periodically throughout the semester in written form may enable new teachers the opportunity to focus less on student nonverbal behavior as an indicator of how well students are receiving their instruction, and more on how well their students are comprehending course content. Angelo and Cross (1993) provide some simple tips on classroom assessments and suggest ways teachers can easily assess their teaching effectiveness.

Interpreting nonverbal behavior. Teachers must become more discerning in *how* they read students' nonverbal behavior. It is our belief that as teachers mature in their profession, they also become more discerning in how they interpret student messages. With experience, teachers learn which student behaviors are a reaction or a response to them or their teaching and which behaviors are a reaction or response to some other stimuli such as a student's physiological needs. For example, is a student's lack of responsiveness in the classroom a response to the teacher's instructional communication or is it a

response to their not getting enough sleep the night before? This type of discernment enhances how teachers respond to such student behavior.

Three ways that new teachers can improve how they interpret student nonverbal behavior is to place the nonverbal behavior in its context, interpret multiple nonverbal behaviors rather than a single behavior, and notice whether or not the verbal and nonverbal dimensions of the message remain congruent. The first author recently encountered Allison, a student in a large lecture class of 400 students, who came to lecture high on marijuana. He asked a question and unfortunately Allison answered it. The context was sorority rush. The multiple cues included Allison responding to his question in an incredibly loud and slurred manner while wearing minimal clothing. Although her verbal message was partially accurate, her nonverbal message suggested that Allison was less than lucid. Her complete message remained incongruent. In fact her sorority sisters had given her the answer and encouraged her to respond to the question. Although this example remains extreme and hopefully rare, it illustrates three ways that teachers can enhance the decoding of student nonverbal behavior.

Another way that may enhance how we interpret students' nonverbal communication is by understanding the role that our own expectations for appropriate student nonverbal behavior plays in the classroom. As long as a student does not violate our expectations, his or her behavior will not likely get our attention. However, behavior that violates our expectations will get noticed. Consider Gary for example. Gary fails to detect and follow the teacher's turn-taking hand gestures and interrupts the teacher as well as other students. As long as Gary follows appropriate turn taking cues, no one seems to notice his

behavior, but once he violates turn taking cues, his nonverbal behavior is considered rude and disrespectful.

This interpretation process becomes a bit more complicated and confusing because we do not treat all nonverbal violators equally. When a nonverbal expectation is violated, we notice the violation and assign a positive or negative valence to the individual violating the expectation. We have a tendency to assign positive valences to individuals we like, find interpersonally attractive, and credible. Conversely, we assign negative valences to individuals we do not like, find interpersonally unattractive, and non-credible. Unlike those individuals who are negatively valenced, positively valenced individuals are granted special permission to violate nonverbal expectations.

For example, consider again the likeable and intelligent Gary who failed to detect and follow his teacher's turn-taking hand gestures. Because Gary is likeable and intelligent, his teacher assigns him a positive valence, which grants him special permission to interrupt the teacher. In short, the teacher does not consider his interruption rude. For a student who is less likeable and perceived to be less intelligent, this type of nonverbal violation would receive a negative valence and the teacher would call the violator on his/her disrespectful and rude behavior. Same nonverbal violation, different interpretation.

It is also important for teachers to understand how their own preconceived expectations for a student or a group of students can frame how they interpret students' nonverbal messages. Research consistently reports that teachers interpret nonverbal cues in ways that are consistent with their initial expectations (Good, 1983). For example, if a student from the football team is in our class and we have a less than favorable preconceived expectation for this

particular group, we may have a tendency to evaluate his nonverbal behavior in a way that fits this particular expectation. Another student may exhibit the same nonverbal behavior, but because of her/his group affiliation and our preconceived expectation for this particular group, the behavior stimulates different meanings and reciprocal behaviors.

Informing students of their nonverbal behavior. Finally, students need to be aware of how their nonverbal behavior affects their teachers and the quality of instruction they receive in the classroom. Why should we keep this a secret? The majority of students have no idea how their own behavior influences the type and quality of instruction they receive from teachers. Many teachers mention on the first day of class that teaching and learning is a partnership and that the success of the class depends on students' classroom involvement and contributions. In many cases, these messages are ignored or not taken seriously.

Over the past several years, there has been a cultural shift to view higher education from a customer service perspective. This cultural emphasis will eventually reach the primary and secondary public school systems as taxpaying citizens demand more accountability from their alleged "substandard" educational institutions. For better or worse, viewing educational institutions from a customer service perspective is becoming a reality. Many customer service organizations spend considerable time educating their customers on how to get the most from their products and services. It's time educators do the same. Teachers need to find ways of getting students to understand or to take seriously their role in the instructional communication process. It's time for students to become partially responsible for their own learning and the quality of their educational experiences. Students can ultimately get more from the classroom

experience if they engage in good student behaviors in the classroom. They must understand how their behaviors—good, bad, or indifferent —influence teacher perceptions and teaching. Students can ultimately bring out the best in most of their teachers.

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